

DOG AGGRESSION TO UNFAMILIAR DOGS

You are walking your dog and as another dog approaches, your dog stiffens and begins barking. Your dog is riding in the car and sees another dog and begins growling. Your dog is pacing back and forth at the front door and begins growling and barking when a dog walks by on the sidewalk. When your dog is in the back yard, he barks and runs the fence every time the neighbor dog is outside. Every time you go to the dog park, your dog gets into a fight with another dog over a ball. These are potentially dangerous situations that require immediate attention from you. Threats are signals that your dog may bite and should always be taken seriously.

What Causes Dogs to Be Aggressive To Unfamiliar Dogs?

Dogs that are aggressive to unfamiliar dogs may not be aggressive to dogs that live in the same household or to people. Many dogs are not well socialized to other dogs, and while they can get along with family dogs that are familiar to them, their social skills do not extend to unfamiliar dogs.

If the only opportunities your dog has to interact with other dogs is straining at the leash on a walk or passing by yards with other dogs that are barking at him, it's not surprising that he would come to dislike other dogs.

Individual and breed personalities also play a role. If your dog is of a breed that was bred for fighting, he may be predisposed to difficulty in getting along with other dogs. Aggression is also influenced by gender, hormones, experiences early in life and/or later learning.

Aggression to unfamiliar dogs may be due to dominance, possessive, territorial, protective, or fear motivations or it could be redirected or play aggression or a combination of motivations. The type of aggression is based on the body postures and facial expressions of the dog as well as the specific context.

How Can Aggression To Unfamiliar Dogs Be Managed?

If your dog is threatening or aggressive to other dogs, the first and most important thing to do is to take steps to protect other dogs. Keep your dog confined in a secure area so that he cannot escape and harm other dogs. Do not allow your dog off leash if he can come in contact with other dogs. If he must be around other dogs, he should be muzzled. It is especially important that small dogs, puppies, old or frail dogs be protected from your dog.

Sometimes aggression problems can be managed without actually changing the dog's behavior simply by avoiding situations that cause aggression. Preventing the aggressive behavior from happening is the first step in trying to change the behavior. The more your dog continues to "practice" aggression, the less likely you can successfully resolve the problem.

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Ask your pet professional for more information about dog behavior.

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Dogs should never
be allowed to
fight in classes.

How Can Aggression To Unfamiliar Dogs Be Resolved?

Whatever behavior modification techniques are used to modify your dog's behavior must be implemented extremely carefully in order to avoid injury, maximize the chances of success and not make the problem worse. Desensitization and counter conditioning are frequently used with aggressive dogs. Read the Pamphlet for Pet Parents about these techniques to learn more.

Desensitization involves gradually exposing your dog to less intense versions of the stimuli that trigger an aggressive reaction, so that the behavior isn't elicited. Generally, this involves controlling the distance, movement and behavior of the other dog as well as the behavior of your dog. Combining desensitization with counter conditioning techniques makes the process go more quickly.

Counter conditioning involves changing your dog's emotional state so that he is less aroused, tense, or angry in the situations that currently trigger the aggression. It is difficult for your dog to be aggressive if he is relaxed and calm while playing, eating an irresistible treat or enjoying a quiet massage. These emotional states are incompatible with aggression.

For example, you might sit on the front porch with your dog and give him treats as other dogs pass by on the sidewalk across the street. Gradually move closer to the sidewalk while continuing giving treats to encourage relaxed behavior.

Or you might sit outside the boundaries of a dog park or in the car and play with your dog, gently massage him to help him relax, or give him treats to elicit a "good mood" and relaxed behavior.

If such exposures are done in a controlled, careful and gradual way, your dog will progressively learn to tolerate and like the presence and approach of other dogs. These exposure techniques will be much easier if your dog has been trained to sit or lie down when you ask him to. If there is any chance your dog could escape from you and harm another dog, he should be muzzled.

These techniques can be dangerous if not properly implemented. You will probably need the help of an experienced certified applied or veterinary behaviorist or other behavior consultant to help you work with the problem. Talk to your pet professional about help or a referral. You can find out more about trainers and behavior consultants in the Pamphlet for Pet Parents of the same name.

How Can Dog Aggression To Unfamiliar Dogs Be Prevented?

Because the reasons why some dogs develop aggression problems and others don't are not well understood, it is difficult to give specific advice that will be generally effective at preventing these problems.

Neutering male dogs reduces the likelihood of certain forms of aggression. Choosing a breed that wasn't bred to perform any sort of aggressive function such as guarding or fighting should reduce your chances of having a dog with an aggression problem. This doesn't mean any given breed is either inherently aggressive or non-aggressive.

Early socialization to other dogs during puppyhood allows puppies to learn appropriate social skills. Socialization to other dogs must continue throughout life. Social interactions among puppies are quite different than

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among adolescent or adult dogs. Your dog needs to learn how to act in an adult social group, which is quite different from the skills he used as a puppy.

Pleasant, friendly contacts with other dogs should continue throughout your dog's life to help him to be friendly and tolerant of others. Invite family and friends to visit with their dogs, take your dog to dog friendly stores and to parks. Give treats to your dog as you approach and pass other dogs on walks to associate good things with other dogs.

Obedience training your dog using reward-based methods has many beneficial effects, but it's not clear whether such training actually prevents aggression problems. However, training classes can provide opportunities for your dog to socialize with other friendly dogs.

What Not To Do

Don't ignore, rationalize or encourage your dog's threatening behavior toward other dogs. If you allow it to continue, it will only get worse.

Punishing aggressive behavior with physical force or painful procedures is not only dangerous but will make the behavior worse. Do not "scruff shake" or "alpha roll" your dog. Avoid harsh "corrections" with choke or pinch collars. In fact, "correcting" your dog for pulling on the leash to get to other dogs can cause aggression. Do not use remote controlled electronic collars.

Aggression to unfamiliar dogs is not caused by a lack of dominance or leadership by the family. Dominance exercises will not resolve aggression problems.

Training classes are designed to teach your dog basic "commands" such as sit, down, come and stay. While it is always beneficial for your dog to respond to you, basic training will not resolve aggression problems. Enrolling a dog with an aggression problem in a regular obedience class is dangerous.

Some behavior consultants or trainers offer classes specifically designed for aggressive dogs, but you must be extremely careful to choose one that is well managed. Dogs should never be allowed to "fight it out" in these classes. Ask a certified applied or veterinary behaviorist or other behavior consultant to help you evaluate any class you might be interested in.

Do not intervene in a dog fight with your hands or body and risk injury to yourself or others. Spraying both dogs with Spray Shield™, a citronella deterrent, throwing water on the dogs, or making a startling noise is a much safer way to break up a fight so that the dogs can be separated.

Written by Drs. Suzanne Hetts and Daniel Q. Estep, Animal Behavior Associates, Inc. and Ms. Lori Holmberg, M.A. Drs. Hetts and Estep are Certified Applied Animal Behaviorists and international award-winning speakers and authors living in Denver, Colorado. For over 25 years they have been helping pet parents understand their pet's behavior and solve behavior problems.